

REVIEW: *FLOWERS OF LHASA* BY TSHE RING G.YANG SKYID

Reviewed by Pad+ma rig 'dzin བཱ་ཤ་རིག་འཛིན། (Wanmerenzeng 完 么仁增)*



Tshe ring g.yang skyid ཚེ་རིང་གཡང་སྒྱིད། 2015. *Me tog dang rmi lam* མེ་ཏོག་དང་རི་མཚ། [*Flowers of Lha sa*]. Lha sa ལྷ་ས།: Bod ljong mi dmang dpe bskrun khang བོད་རྒྱུང་སྐད་འཕྲིན་ཁང་། རྒྱ་བཟང་། [Tibet People's Publishing House]. 304pp. ISBN:978-7223-04958-0 (Paperback 28 RMB).



Tsering Yangkyi [Tshe ring g.yang skyid ཚེ་རིང་གཡང་སྒྱིད།]. 2022. *Flowers of Lhasa* [*Me tog dang rmi lam* མེ་ཏོག་དང་རི་མཚ།] (Christopher Peacock, translator). London: Balestier Press. 206pp. ISBN-13: 978-1913891220 (Paperback 16.99USD) Amazon link: <https://amzn.to/3yvnyLYj>

TSHE RING G.YANG SKYID

The inside cover of the Tibetan language version informs that Tshe ring g.yang skyid was born in a common worker's family by the Yar lung River in 1963. After graduating from Tibet University, she worked as a teacher and continued writing creatively, with fiction as a major focus. In 2007, her collected stories, *Ri rtse'i sprin dkar*¹ *White Clouds on the Mountain Peaks* won the Dijiujie Shaoshu Minzu Yuyan Wenxue Chuangzuo Junmaji Jiang 'Ninth National Minority Literature Horse Award'. Her collected essays *Mi tshe'i 'grul bzhud* *Journey of Life* was published in 2014. Subsequently, she concentrated on her first novel, *Me tog dang rmi lam* *Flowers of Lhasa*, released in 2016 and attracted many readers from the three Tibetan regions in China and positive comments on social media, in newspapers, and magazines. Her

* Pad+ma rig 'dzin (Wanmerenzeng). 2023. Review: *Flowers of Lhasa* by Tshe ring g.yang skhid. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 63:457-468.

¹ Virtanen offers short summaries for each story in *Ri rtse'i sprin dkar* *'White Clouds on the Mountain Peaks'* (2013:128-129).

stories *So nam shor ba'i ljang bu* 'The Abandoned Sprout' won the Third *Sbrang char* Literature Award, and *Ri rtse'i sprin dkar* 'White Clouds on the Mountain' won the Second Gangs Rgyan Cup (Mkha' bzang mo 2019:18).

FLOWERS OF LHASA - CHARACTERS

In the list below, I give the characters' names as they appear in the English version, followed by the Wylie version (which I use in this review), and English and Wylie names for the "four flowers."

The "Four Flowers"

- Drölkar, Sgrol dkar, Dahlia, Pad kha'i me tog
- Dzomky, 'Dzoms skyid, Magnolia, Aug chos me tog
- Xiao Li, Cassia, Ltogs lha me tog
- Yangdzom, G.yang 'dzoms, Azalea, Ba lu me tog

Other Characters

- Butri, Bu khrid, manages a small restaurant
- Drolma, A cag sgrol ma, the wife of Snyan grags
- Karma Dorjie, Skar ma rdo rje, the businessman who rapes Sgol dkar
- Lhadze, Lha mdzes, the daughter of Snyan grags
- Nyendrak, Snyan grags, a county official

The author omnisciently describes four young women's challenges, hopes, and dreams. Three are from Tibetan rural areas, and one is from a Chinese agricultural area of Sichuan Province. All four have the same destiny in Lha sa City. Initially taking service jobs, they eventually work as highly paid, disreputable employees of an establishment known as the Rose. Afterward, the four do not find an urban identity or return to rural life - a double identity crisis (Zengbaodangzhou 2018:185).

The first chapter opens with Bu khrid, a small Tibetan restaurant owner, and the first seasonal snowfall in Lha sa City. Bu khrid's frustration from limited business is intensified by a bunch of noisy kids. Venting her depression, she throws a lump of coal at

the kids who disappear into the horizon, leaving long dirty spots on a white snow-filled expanse. These unpleasant black stains foreshadow the eventual lives of the girls at the Rose, who give themselves names of flowers, concealing their real names while working in the city and avoiding verbal interaction with people in the common yard where their rented room is located. Their neighbors secretly refer to them as 'Owls' because they work at night.

Bu khrid is from the same village as Sgrol dkar and experienced the same fate and difficulties as what awaits the girls in Lha sa City. Bu khrid makes an appointment with a wealthy man and Sgrol dkar at her restaurant on the day of the first snowfall. Unfamiliar with drinking and flirting as social practice, Sgrol dkar agrees to meet the man, Rdo rje, who, with his friend, forces Sgrol dkar to drink beer, and later in the night, Rdo rje rapes her, which the story suggests, destroys her normal life and future dreams. Before this unfortunate event, we are unaware of Sgrol dkar's job, though her cracked hands and hunger in the afternoon when she reaches the restaurant hint that her life is not easy. The author deftly employs flashbacks, maneuvering between events in the narrative, challenging her readers to read carefully to grasp the storyline (Rna me 2021:130).

Sgrol dkar reappears in later chapters in a scene when she meets an acquaintance, G.yang 'dzoms, who was orphaned in early childhood. When she is a teenager, Snyan grags, a county official, visits her village and brings her to his home to work as a maid. Her diligence and hard work make her an excellent cook and housekeeper. However, the constant conflict between Snyan grags' wife and their teenage daughter makes life at the official's opulent house unpleasant. In time, the official's wife falsely accuses G.yang 'dzoms of stealing. In desperation, she leaves the house and wanders the city streets.

Recalling that she has Sgrol dkar's phone number, G.yang 'dzoms dials it, and Sgrol dkar soon arrives and takes her to a rented room she shares with two other "flowers." Sgrol dkar tells G.yang 'dzoms to stay with her where they both can live on her earnings. She does not tell her about her work at the Rose. Feeling lonely and useless, G.yang 'dzoms goes to work as a restaurant dishwasher.

Sgrol dkar visits and observes her washing dishes under cold running water without gloves. Constant washing dishes, pans, and towels lead to her hands cracking and bleeding. Sgrol dkar sympathetically takes her back to their room. That night, she calls a Chinese businessman for supper at a high-end restaurant.

Later, Sgrol dkar asks the Chinese man to buy clothes for G.yang 'dzoms and insists she accept them despite her discomfort in taking a stranger's gift. She becomes noticeably more attractive after putting on the clothes.

To relieve her boredom and loneliness, G.yang 'dzoms accompanies Sgrol dkar to the Rose and is left alone on a sofa when Sgrol dkar leaves to serve her customers till dawn. Subsequently, G.yang 'dzoms joins the servers, learns how to dance, and offers stage performances for the customers attracted by her slim body and dance skills.

One night a male customer invites her to accompany him to drink beer and insists G.yang 'dzoms drink. When she is intoxicated, he rapes her. The next morning Sgrol dkar finds G.yang 'dzoms naked in bed, desperately weeping. The author provides a detailed description of a white sheet dotted with blood and red lanterns hanging from the ceiling, an image reminding the reader of the dirty spots on white snow in the first chapter.

As noted by Orthofer,¹ the other two girls have similar difficult lives after poverty ends their schooling or a family member forces them to earn money for the family. In contrast, 'Dzoms skyid has a pleasant family life with her parents until her boyfriend discards her after learning she is pregnant during their senior high school years. Drugs to induce an abortion send her to the hospital. After regaining consciousness, her mother, sitting by her bed, spits in her face and scolds her for disgracing the family. This leads to 'Dzoms skyid leaving her home and eventually working at the Rose.

The last "flower," Xiao Li, is a Chinese girl from rural Sichuan Province. After her stepmother gives birth to a son, she takes Xiao Li out of middle school and compels her to earn money to support the family and help provide a good education for her only

¹ <https://bit.ly/3Kd3evW> 19 August 2022.

son, who she hopes will become a government official. Her father goes to work in Shanghai, hoping to ease his daughter's hard life. Predictably, the evil stepmother's mistreatment intensifies once the father is absent. Xiao Li leaves home for Lha sa City, where she works in a barber shop and becomes acquainted with girls who work at the Rose, where she eventually finds employment.

Xiao Li is depicted as selfish, stingy, and self-centered, saving money, and taking advantage of her roommates by wearing their new fancy clothes. When Sgrol dkar becomes very ill, Xiao Li is afraid of contracting her illness and doesn't wear the fine clothes Sgrol dkar gives her, reflecting a general historical Tibetan view of the Han.

Once Sgrol dkar was ill, Xiao Li grudgingly offers some of her precious money to help her:

Before leaving the hospital, Cassia took 500 yuan from her purse and gave it to Dahlia. This decision had required a steely determination on her part, but even still she was loath to part with the money, and she caressed the bills for a good while before handing them over (English version:175).

Despite differences and tensions, the girls' similar life backgrounds and fates unite them under a single shared roof where they support each other.

Sgrol dkar becomes ill and is hospitalized. As her illness steadily worsens, the girls pool their cash, gold necklaces, and rings to pay for Sgrol dkar's medical expenses. Xiao Li and 'Dzoms skyid realize that their work at the Rose threatens their life, so they decide to leave for home while G.yang 'dzoms stays to care for Sgrol dkar. After Sgrol dkar dies, G.yang 'dzoms finds herself behind a nun prostrating around the Bar skor. Spellbound by the pristine purity shining from the nun's eyes, the author hints that G.yang 'dzoms may become a nun, but this is open-ended.

...

"The voice of the narrative is full of sympathy," writes Sgo me snying byams thse ring (2021:146), a comment resonating with what is often heard from Tibetans, particularly the emphasis on compassion and tolerance, especially stressed by elders and

religious figures. I hasten to add that real life has many contractions rendering Tibetan lives as complex as those of other human groups.

G.yang 'dzoms resents A cag sgrol ma who maligns and expels her from the house where she works as a servant. She is also extremely angry with Bu khrid for taking advantage of Sgrol dkar's beauty to maneuver her into an intoxicated vulnerable situation to satisfy the sexual desire of a man whose support she wants for her small failing restaurant. Sgrol dkar's rape is depicted as ruining her life.

When G.yang 'dzoms later encounters aged Bu khrid near a monastery, sweeping steep stone steps, she almost explodes from pent-up anger. However, the tenderness of Bu khrid's chanting calms G.yang 'dzoms, engendering sympathy to the point that she gives fifty RMB to old Bu khrid, who is now a nun. Her boundless tolerance allows her to forgive poor aged A cag sgrol ma, caged in endless sorrow and regret. Similarly, 'Dzoms skyid was not tolerated by her mother because of her high school pregnancy, but after a period of separation, she says, "As long as your heart is clean that's all that matters" (English version:199). Resentment, tolerance, and understanding between the characters solve conflict.

The novel ends with a certain peacefulness. On the night Sgrol dkar passes away, she falls asleep more calmly than the nights before. 'Dzoms skyid's family is again harmonious, and G.yang 'dzoms experiences a deep sense of tranquility when encountering the prostrating nun on the circumambulation circuit. However, after Sgrol dkar's death, G.yang 'dzoms escorts 'Dzoms skyid to the bus station and goes to a nearby teahouse where the slowness and leisurely atmosphere disturb her, as do the clothing, make-up, and the behavior of waitresses (newcomers to the city from remote areas) in the next door restaurant as they try to attract male passersby on the street into the restaurant. This repulsion, however, does nothing to alter Sgrol dkar and her friends' unpleasant fates as life in the city continues.

What explains such tragedy? The attraction of unrealistic romantic ideas about the big glittering city where money can be made more easily than farming? Competition between rural families where the city and incomes that can be earned offer victory?

For example, Sgrol dkar earned enough to build a new house in her village so her family would not be denigrated, and she also supports her brother through his university education but at the cost of her life.

Virtanen (2013) stresses that Tshe ring g.yang skyid focuses on female development - the growth of female protagonists. Sgo me snying byams tshe ring (2021:141) comments that the urban space the author chose is crucial to creating *Flowers of Lhasa*, where the four key female characters are in the process of development when discontinuing their formal education after middle school. Lacking the maturity to make wise life decisions, their mistakes are accentuated by the girls' admiration of a female doctor who encourages the girls to make correct life choices. While Sgrol dkar is hospitalized, she confides that if she recovers from her illness, she will return home and be an honest farmer even though, as G.yang' dzoms recognizes, the prevailing social view is, "...once a woman is labelled a prostitute, she will forever be a prostitute" (English version:204).

G.yang 'dzoms recalls her friend's regret before she died, "I have nothing left but resentment and regret my past. This illness is the only thing that life has left me with" (English version:204). Likewise, regardless of why the girls became sex workers, they all admitted they made the wrong journey and longed for a normal honest life in their homeland. Is this for an educational purpose? Mkha' 'gro bzang mo claims:

Tshe ring g.yang skyid advocates using realistic literature and creativity in uniting literature and social reality to educate and persuade readers of the value of beauty, truth, and kindness to society (Mkha' bzang mo 2019:21).

Tshe ring g.yang skyid highlights men's disgusting, offensive behavior in this novel. For example, Xiao Li is treated sadistically by a Chinese customer who almost bites off one of her nipples and shoves a beer bottle into her vagina. Sgrol dkar and G.yang' dzoms are raped by men, emphasizing the girls' helplessness, weakness, and subsequent hopelessness. Once the

girls lose hope for a respectable life, they make wrong choices emphasizing how the loss of virginity negatively affects the girls' psyches.¹

The Rose's boss convinces the girls to sign contracts with their fingerprints and then asks them to pay 2,000 RMB as a deposit. Lacking the funds, they must agree to work at the Rose to pay off the deposit. G.yang' dzoms was also expelled from her maid position in the official's mansion without pay. 'Dzoms skyid' describes men with a Tibetan proverb: "...she thought they were all the same, heartless, fickler than a horse is fast or a sheep's tail is short" (English version: 171).

Tshe ring g.yang skyid does allow for moments of agency. 'Dzoms skyid slaps a Chinese man after learning he secretly tested her blood in a hospital for STI (Sexually Transmitted Infections), and Sgrol dkar tries to punish those who discriminate against and unfairly treat G.yang' dzoms. For example, she criticizes a restaurant manager for forcing G.yang' dzoms to use her bare hands to wash dishes with cold water and suggests G.yang' dzoms collect wages she is due from A cag sgrol ma.

Regarding language use, Mkha' 'gro bzang mo (2019:52) lists some fifty Lha sa dialectical items from *Flowers of Lhasa* to stress how the author's life background influences her novel. However, most such lexical formulations can be found in dictionaries and not the colloquial speech of a certain location of the enormous Tibet Autonomous Region, i.e., readers from A mdo areas (like me) can easily understand the novel's language. The items include the English word "glass" written phonetically in Tibetan, which I also encountered in *Prayers in the Wind* (Tshe ring nor bu) and *The Secret Tale of Tesur House* (Brag gdong bkras gling dbang rdor). This is testimony to the influence of English on earlier Tibetan society. I also found the use of human names for beer of interest, e.g., Lha sa beer, "Lha sgron," and Budweiser, "Pal sgron."

¹ The significance of virginity to Tibetans is controversial. Lobsang Yongdan, for example, criticizes the idea of the importance of virginity presented in Tibetan literature, claiming that emphasis on maintaining virginity until marriage is a Chinese (not Tibetan) cultural trait (<https://bit.ly/3L6bjTu> 12 September 2022).

Mkha' 'gro bzang mo (2019:53) and Bstan 'dzin chos nyid (2018:62) praise the skillful use of Tibetan proverbs that Christopher Peacock has deftly translated, along with folksong lyrics and the text in general. For example, well-known Tibetan song lyrics go:

We're fated to be a pair of swans; if all we've got to eat is reeds, at least we can eat them together.

and

When the willow on that mountain bends, the poplar on this mountain bends; when they bend, they bend together, when they don't, it's each to their own (English version:65 and 54, respectively).

Tibetan-English readers might more easily recognize characters' names and places in the English version if Wylie transliterations were provided, at least in an appendix.

The author's tone and narrative style render the intricate details of the supporting stories into coherent narratives. For example, Sgo me snying byams tshe ring (2021) comments, "Readers seem to listen to the narrative face to face" (146). Bstan 'dzin chos nyid has a somewhat different reading, commenting on what she deems an oversimplified approach in focusing on tragic life stories rather than the value of love and other positive aspects of society (2018:76-77).

I recommend the English version to non-Tibetan culture readers because it represents a slice of contemporary Tibetan life on the edge of modernization, featuring conflicts related to education, generation gaps, and differences between rural and urban residents. For example, the author describes the discomfort of Sgrol dkar's parents in the city when Sgrol dkar's mother refuses to eat in a city restaurant, insisting that the restaurant's unclean food will defile her and hurt her teeth. Readers seeking a better understanding of Tibetan culture and contemporary life, particularly fragile female "lives marred by lack of opportunities,

poverty, and resignation,"¹ will benefit from this realistic novel.

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TIBETAN TERMS

aug chos me tog ལུག་ཚོས་མེ་དོག

ba lu me tog བ་ལུ་མེ་དོག

brag gdong bkraṣ gling dbang

rdor བྲག་གདོང་བཀྲམ་གླིང་དབང་དོར།

Butri, bu khrid ཐུ་ཁྱིད།

Drölkar, sgrol dkar རྩོལ་དཀར།

Drolma, a cag sgrol ma

ཨ་ཅག་སྐོལ་མ།

Dzomky, 'dzoms skyid

འཛོམས་སྐྱིད།

gangs rgyan ཀང་རྒྱན།

Karma Dorjie, karma rdo rje

ཀར་དོ་རྟེ།

lha sgron ལྷ་སྒྲོན།

Lhadze, lha mdzes ལྷ་མཛེས།

Lhasa, Lha sa ལྷ་ས།

ltogs lha me tog ལྷགས་ལྷ་མེ་དོག

mi tshe'i 'grul bzhud

མི་ཚེའི་འགྲུལ་བཞུད།

mkha' 'gro bzang mo

མཁའ་འགྲོ་བཟང་མོ།

Nyandrak, snyan grags

སྟན་གྲགས།

pad kha'i me tog པད་ཁའི་མེ་དོག

pal sgron པལ་སྒྲོན།

rna me རྣ་མེ།

rnam thar རྣམ་ཐར།

sbrang char སྤང་ཅར།

sgo me snying byams tshe

ring སྒོ་མེ་སྟིང་བྱམས་ཚེ་རིང་།

so nam shor ba'i ljang bu

སོ་ནམ་ཤོར་བའི་ལྷང་བུ།

srang སྤང་།

Tsering Yangkyi, tshe ring

gyang skyid ཚེ་རིང་གཡང་སྐྱིད།

tshe ring nor bu ཚེ་རིང་ནོར་བུ།

Yangdzom, g.yang 'dzoms

གཡང་འཛོམས།

zi ling ཟེ་ལིང་།

CHINESE TERMS

Dijiujie Shaoshu Minzu Yuyan Wenxue Chuangzuo Junmajiang

第九届少数民族语言文学创作骏马奖

Sichuan 四川

Xiao Li 小李

Xining 西宁